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ABSTRACT

Comparisons of writing instruction to therapy often focus on the teacher and student interaction, yet the analogy is necessarily more extended and complicated. Compositionists should be paying attention to issues of affect and providing teachers and program administrators with a course of study that includes introductions to personality theory, psychoanalytic concepts, and basic counseling, even if such a course of study mainly confirms that there are large differences between a teacher/administrator's and a therapist's roles. Personal experience, tantalizing hints from creative writers, and remarks from students all testify to the personal, therapeutic aspects of writing--while the need to valorize and and define "art writing" (as distinct from what might be called "just writing") seems to make some of its practitioners negate the essential power of creative writing. Writing teachers affect students in a variety of complicated ways, and response pedagogies inevitably elicit powerful responses from students. How do writing teachers respond to journal or essay discussions of suicide, incest, anorexia, and depression? The writing program administrator (WPA) explores and participates in forms of the "talking cure" on multiple levels and from multiple perspectives. It is time to enlarge WPA training by providing new teachers and administrators with an introduction to psychoanalytic theory and the basics of counseling to support them in their necessary work. (Two notes are included; 23 references are attached.) (RS)

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Writing as Therapy, Writing Teachers as Therapists, WPAs as ?--Underexplored Analogies for Composition

In the last fifteen years, as a student and teacher of writing, I've often wished that I had been given more encouragement for investigating the personal, therapeutic, and affective aspects of writing. Although I've used all I've learned about writers' cognitive processes as well as text and rhetorical strategies, I find that I need daily to know more about the least talked about and least researched aspects of writing--how writing involves and celebrates the personal and how writing instruction and program administration are thoroughly connected to our personalities.

Comparisons of writing instruction to therapy often focus on the teacher and student interaction, the analogy, I believe, is necessarily more extended and complicated. I think compositionists should be paying attention to issues of affect and providing teachers and program administrators with a course of study that includes introductions to personality theory, psychoanalytic concepts, and basic counseling, even if such a course of study mainly confirms that there are large differences between a teacher/administrator's and therapist's roles. "Perhaps it might be helpful to remind ourselves," says Ann Murphy, "that the analogy between the two professions is not symmetrical: analysis, as Shoshana Felman discusses, may be a 'pedagogical experience' (27), but teaching is not a purely psychoanalytic one" 179). Yet I would add that it may be crucial for WPAs and teachers to understand the degree to which both activities <u>are</u> pedagogical.

This essay only begins to explore these issues since writing and

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therapy connections exist at the composing, classroom, and administrative levels. By reviewing these connections, I hope to suggest where future discussions might take us.

Writing as Therapy

Creative writers have long offered tantalizing hints concerning the therapeutic aspects of writing. For instance, Willa Cather acknowledges the power of early life experiences: "Most of the basic material a writer works with is acquired before the age of fifteen" and Milan Kundera sees the self as subject: "But isn't it true that an author can write only about himself?" (Murray Shoptalk 16-19).

And I can attest to the connections from personal experience. As a writer in the literary marketplace from the 1970s through the 1990s, I've learned that I write because I want to and need to; I try to publish because I've found pleasure and reward in sharing my private explorations publicly. In talking to a writing student recently, I found myself explaining that I didn't keep a journal even though I advocated journal-keeping. Instead, I write and publish poems. The poems, I said, have two faces for me--the public face, a text I am willing to send out into the interpretive arena--and the inner diary. When I reread my own poems I remember the reason I wrote, the way I felt writing, the personal story behind the public story, and only then do I stop to examine my craft.

Equally, composition students often tell us of the many ways they "use" writing for personal knowledge, savoring their texts and sharing them with friends, lovers, and families. Why then, are most "professional" writers quick to deny the personal, therapeutic aspects of their work? Or why is it striking when a writer does

discuss the pragmatic and personal aspects of writing, as did Donald Murray in a recently published piece titled "All Writing Is Autobiography." Why does a claim as simple as Murray's need to be made at all?

Traditionally, "art writing" has been felt by its practitioners to be somehow beyond and better than writing-to-learn or academic writing, what I'll facetiously call "just writing." There are tangled reasonings behind this assumption which need to be examined before any author can acknowledge the positive aspects of writing as a journey of personal discovery, akin to the therapeutic process of a talking-cure.

If writing is "just writing"--something useful, personal, and productive, perhaps even therapeutic--then, of course, the activity of writing becomes radically more democratic, since we all have life histories and autobiographies that are in need of and open to exploration through writing. Creative writing, on the other hand, is a profession that valorizes the single author and his "unique" written product. To support such a valorization, successful creative writing becomes "art," and art writing is often defined as apolitical and not-useful. "The first requirement of a work of art in the twentieth century," says Jane Tompkins, "is that it should do nothing" (210).

And the need to so define and valorize art writing, seems to have placed some of its practitioners in the position of negating the essential power of creative writing. During interviews, professional writers may acknowledge and then deny the ways their writing helps them with day-to-day living, even as they assert that they couldn't

live if they couldn't go on writing. There have, over time, been some challenges to traditional definitions of art writing, and these challenges are usually found in "movements" like those of the surrealists or the confessional and Beat poets, writers who celebrate the personal or whose stock-in-trade is the radical experiment and the private-made-public.

As someone who moves between both professions--creative writing and composition--I've discovered that creative writers don't know about or trust composition writing research. At stake is a writer's "relationship" to his own writing beliefs, habits, successes or failures. As in any "relationship," change threatens a working status quo and induces resistance. And in composition research, we seem to have agreed to a status quo also, one where we generally research in the ill-defined area called "non-fiction writing" while "creative" texts generally remain outside our domains.

Some theorists and researchers are calling for an examination of the connections between creative writing and composition as well as exploring the interrelatedness of feelings and writing. Alice Brand has suggested that we need "hot cognition," that is research agendas that include attention to emotions. She outlines some of the work that is currently being undertaken:

> We know that affective traits and personality overlap conceptually and empirically (Plutchik and Kellerman). We are just now recognizing that personality may govern discursive style (Jensen and DiTiberio; Selzer), just as discursive style has an impact on personality (Brand, Therapy; Denman). In fact, how personality influences the way writers function is the direction

> I think composition research is ultimately headed. (Brand "The Why" 441)[2]

Robert Brooke through his research asserts that the study of writing is really the study of writers and of their developing writing identities: "The entire "process, not product" revolution can be seen as a change of focus from results to behaviors, from texts to people--in its best forms, the goal is to teach people to be writers, not to produce good texts in the course of a semester" ("Modeling" 38). And this assumption--that we are teaching people to be writers not simply to produce texts--has great import for the role of the writing teacher who is herself always in the process of developing her teaching identity. This is particularly true if she is new to the field and being trained to become a writing teacher by investigating her own writing. The basic tenent of the National Writing Projects--that writing teachers should be writers--is notably similar to that of Freud who required would-be analysts to undergo analysis (McGee 667). Process instruction and response pedagogies necessitate change, so the move to process requires that we give greater attention to the people undergoing, and resisting, those changes: writers and writing teachers.

Teacher as Therapist

In a number of recent articles in the major composition journals, teachers have begun to explore writing teachers' relationships to their students, using personal experience and relying, often, on both clinical and therapeutic analogies. Diane Morrow, a doctor turned

writing tutor and instructor, suggests that as a field we reject even metaphorical connections between writing and the health professions because they present a negative view of the teaching relationship, as that of an authoritative physician attending to a "sick" writer. Morrow claims though that the physician/patient relationship in medicine is changing and that the metaphor may now be more relevant than before (218-219).

Gregory Ulmer, however, uses the analogy quite comfortably, perhaps because he sees the "patient's" submission to therapy as elective:

> The patient agrees to put herself in the care of the analyst, but then she may resist all attempts of the analyst to cure her. Similarly, our students sign up for our classes with the intention of being educated, but then not infrequently they refuse to cooperate with the process...because people tend to accept only that which corresponds to the opinions they already hold. (762-763).

In noting that resistance is one of the natural responses to submission, even when undertaken by the learner for the learner's own good, Ulmer suggests that the student's job is to become more open to change.

Lad Tobin supports Diane Morrow's claims that it may be time to explore the connections between health professions and the profession of writing instruction when he notes that a number of writing theorists bring up the connection between writing and therapy and then repudiate that connection as being no more than metaphorical. This is not surprising for transference (students becoming deeply

interested in the teacher's self) and counter-transference (teachers becoming deeply interested in the student's self) in the Freudian sense, involves teachers and students in emotional relationships with ethical dimensions (Torgersen), and transference and counter-transference both have to be dealt with for a therapy or a pedagogy to succeed.

Metaphors, as we have been learning, may signify real conditions or alert us to important new ways of conceptualizing a subject. Certainly when looking at writing and therapy more than just metaphor-making is at stake. For instance, as concerned writing teachers, we acknowledge our relationship to students through liberatory pedagogies, student-centered classrooms, personal discovery essay assignments and so on. At the same time, we sometimes finesse responsibility for students' actual responses and feelings. Or, if we acknowledge responsibility, we're still unsure of degrees and limits of such responsibility. How do we respond to journal or essay discussions of suicide, incest, anorexia, and depression, the underside of the often-elicited writing about a high school triumph, personal best, or greatest moment?

It is not surprising that students open up in writing classes since workshops usually enroll twenty to thirty students and aim to develop community feelings. This is a welcome contrast to the many impersonal, large-enrollment classes a student may experience in the modern university. However, when community engenders connectedness and feelings, interpersonal relationships are at the center: "...we cannot create intensity and deny tension, celebrate the personal and deny the significance of the personalities involved" (Tobin "Reading"

342).

Lad Tobin raises some of the issues I've been grappling with for several years, openly acknowledging teaching beliefs which I believe have not generally been sanctioned:

> In my writing courses, I want to meddle with my students' emotional lives, and I want their writing to meddle with mine. Transference and counter-transference emotions are threatening because they are so powerful, but they are most destructive and inhibiting in the writing class when we fail to acknowledge and deal with them (342)

I'm not sure that I've always intended to meddle but I have no doubt that I have. Whether they understand transference or counter-transference, students see any sort of teacher intervention as authoritative, and they always expect to learn from their teachers. Robert Brooke by way of the writings of Jacques Lacan describes the teacher as the Subject Supposed to Know. "The mentor, the priest, the therapist, the lover, the guru, the martial arts master...helps us 'find ourselves,' helps us 'unlock our true feelings,' helps us know ourselves as we can't on our own" (682). We may be uncomfortable acknowledging that we are about to take such a momentous role in our students' lives because "unlocking" involves us in both transference and worries about counter-transference. However, the Lacanian version of transference is posited on the notion of the student forging an understanding of separated parts of herself; the "other" is not necessarily the teacher but a part of herself that she needs to and can come to know.[1]

Teachers do affect students in a variety of complicated ways.

Lad Tobin suggests that unknowingly we may "read" students and our instruction in ways that help us see our classrooms in the best possible light.[2] Additionally, he found himself "reading" classroom situations according to his personal scripts, for instance, not getting along with students who were unintentionally re-creating problematic scenarios from Tobin's own high school learning past. Tobin believes that being aware of the similarities between writing and therapy keeps him from preferring the student who makes him feel secure or avoiding the student who threatens him. He says: "And that is what I need to monitor: as soon as I find myself giving up on a student or, on the other hand, feeling tremendous personal pride in a student's work, I need to question my own motives. I need to discover in what ways my biases and assumptions--both conscious and unconscious--are shaping my teaching" (347).

The types of powerful "misreadings" that can take place between students and teachers is highlighted in Richard Murphy's article "Anorexia: The Cheating Disorder." Murphy describes how he misunderstood, misread, and intimidated a student who didn't want to claim the portrayal she had written for him concerning her experiences as an anorectic. For this student, writing involved her in an undeniably a therapeutic interaction with her teacher <u>even if he didn't know it</u>.

The anorectic student was in the position described by Ann Murphy:

> In encouraging our students to unlock and express their ideas, feelings, and beliefs more effectively, we are, like psychoanalysts, insisting that they confront lost or denied

> elements of themselves--itself a project filled with social, familiar, and personal dangers--and then that they express those elements in written, often alien discourse, the very use of which arouses a whole new host of terrors. (175)

However unwittingly, Richard Murphy's pedagogy elicited a confrontation between the student and her past which the teacher then did not believe.

Response pedagogies inevitably elicit powerful responses from our students. Ann Murphy suggests that we should be wary of creating this classroom; Lad Tobin claims he has come to seek this classroom; Richard Murphy illustrates how he could not avoid this classroom; and Robert Brooke suggests that our field's movement to process pedagogy has made this classroom inevitable. Clearly, things are getting complicated these days in the profession of writing instruction.

Personally, I agree with Robert Brooke's suggestion that such classrooms are inevitable, given a response pedagogy. Ann Murphy has noticed this is especially true for basic writers; she feels that:

> ...just as an analysand returns to and repeats ancient family traumas with her analyst, so too, I suggest, the writing student returns to and re-enacts an ancient drama of initial wonder at the brave new world of language and ideas and then subsequent, painful humiliation and defeat by teachers, institutions, and cultural/political forces.... (184)

But I would enlarge her assertions by suggesting that such a movement may occur for any writer who enters the always dramatic acculturation process of writing within institutional settings. Writing classrooms

are complex arenas: "students and their writing contribute to the linguistic, psychological, and social richness of the classroom, creating what Charles Schuster, describing Bakhtin's view of language, calls 'a rich stew of implications, saturated with other accents, tones, idioms, meanings, voices, influences, intentions' (597)" (Ritchie 159).

Part of this "rich stew" is the teacher. Writing teachers may co-author their students' essays as they assign and shape a text (through conference and draft review)--and then subsequently "create" a student over the course of the semester. For instance, Lad Tobin found himself reading a student's text: "in such a way that it reached a self-confident and successful resolution, by making her into a text with a happy ending" (335). The problem, he feels, is not that we do this rather that we deny that we do this. We need to examine teaching as a constitutive process, consider more deeply the idea of the teacher as the Subject Supposed to Know, and continue to explore the many complicated issues of gender, transference, and counter-tranference in the writing classroom; if we don't, we will fail to act on available developments in reading and writing theory and research in our own field.

To start, we need to acknowledge these issues and investigate what we might learn from analogous psychoanalytic discussions; this is not necessarily a comfortable suggestion. Like "hot" cognitions, emotions are "hot" topics for us all and ones we tend to avoid. I believe, however, that issues of emotions and teachers' actions are becoming more important since they deal with the "why" of the classroom. Why did this class work? Why did this student stop

trying? Why is teaching writing so difficult and so rewarding? And, finally, if emotions, therapeutic relationships, and hot cognition, are important for teachers, they must also signify for writing program administrators.

WPAs as ?

Trudelle Thomas suggests that graduate students as apprentice Writing Program Administrators should be given training in five areas; they should apprentice through a practicum, should acquire a broad picture of the world of a WPA by serving on department and university committees, should teach a variety of composition courses, should be involved in teacher training, and should learn about testing and assessment.

This will be useful but will it be enough? How, I wonder, will the WPA learn to counsel a teacher who comes to her to discuss a student who is experiencing ongoing sexual abuse from a father who is "putting her through school"? How will the WPA deal with the teacher who is concerned over a student's response to an autobiographical collage assignment that opens this way with a quote from the student's two-year old journal entry: "Dear Diary, Die, die die! Death looks good compared to my life" and is followed by a new freewrite titled "My Unorthodox Funeral." "My Unorthodox Funeral" is an account of the writer's imagined burial at sea: "Though she felt desperately depressed, my mother took control of her reactions and seated herself Indian-style with the urn between her legs. Feeling comforted, my mother began to recite my favorite poem."

What should a teacher and the WPA think, feel, and do when the

student, as this one did, does not return again to class? Equally, how should the WPA react when a TA calls on the weekend to read a student essay in which two students describe how they plan to kill a third student that weekend. The story ends: "Tonight, Janet and I will fix everything with him, permanently."

Inevitably, a Writing Program Administrator will need to counsel teachers about highly charged problems, problems that can not be labeled exclusively "academic." Students and teachers resist their instruction, the program, and the institution, and the WPA is someone who is in a position of power and authority within the English department and the university; no matter how well-intentioned or how sensitive and right-minded, she helps to maintain those structures.

Ann Murphy reminds us that Freud linked three powers--that of teaching, psychoanalysis and government. Students trust writing teachers with their thinking and their feelings because our classes are "friendly, intimate, and safe" (Ann Murphy 183). Teachers are asked during training to trust their WPA who helps them institute the response pedagogies which create intimate classrooms. Yet I've heard myself and other teacher educators say more than once: "You're not a trained counselor. The best you can do is get students to the counseling center quickly." And while that is a fact I believe in and a strategy I support, I know that statement is longer adequate.

Such a response didn't help me early in my teaching career to deal with my guilt over a "problem" student who committed suicide the semester after he was in my class. It didn't help me to counsel an able new teacher who experienced "teaching anxiety" to the point that

she resigned her TAship. It didn't help me endure the long weekend when I was "pretty sure" the student paper about killing another student was a satire although the student's experienced TA was alarmed because the paper was so different from the assigned topic as to seem believable; the teacher and I both worried until a student's Monday conference confirmed that the paper had been a "joke."

When my current administrative office was turned over to me with its student-journal suicide file and the out-going director's listing of hot-lines and crisis support numbers, I felt then--as I feel today--that saying what we're not (not therapists, not counselors, not specialists in affect or dysfunction) is not helping us to understand and prepare to be what we are. I believe the WPA explores and participates in forms of "the talking cure" on multiple levels and from multiple perspectives. Perhaps it is time to enlarge WPA training by providing new teachers and adminstrators with an introduction to psychoanalytic theory and the basics of counseling to support them in their necessary work.

When I read books like Kennedy and Charles' On Becoming A Counselor or Moursund's The Process of Counseling and Therapy taken from my University library shelves, I don't feel like rushing out and practicing without a license. I know that I need someone with more experience to help me pick the best books and to curb what might be an overly facile application of what I am learning. But I do believe though that I need to make a start. The analogies between writing instruction and therapy have something to offer me and something I need to offer to the teachers I train. Particularly, program administrators may begin by reading, but we all need also to

investigate other avenues of support, contacting the campus counseling center and the psychology department. Even more, though, we need to find colleagues in the composition community who are open to these discussions and willing to share what they have observed, suspected, and learned in similar situations through talk, conference papers and journal articles. We need to include these topics and this training in graduate curriculums, and we need to listen to and respect the affective needs of our students and our selves.

Notes

1. McGee and Brooke are discussing a theory of transference derived from the writings of Jacques Lacan rather than those of Sigmund Freud; the special issues (October and November 1987) of College English in which their articles and Gregory Ulmer's article appear provide a good introduction to Lacan in relation to pedagogy.
2. Glynda Hull and Mike Rose on the other hand warns us that if we don't "read" students well, we miss the clues to student understanding which are imbedded in students' personal histories.

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